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INDIANA COLLECTION

Merrillville--Hist

Barney's mighty oak

Photo by Kirk John Mitchell

Its gnarly limbs climbing skyward, this beautiful bur oak has been a northwest Indiana landmark for years. Experts approximate its age to be around 600 years.

600-year-old tree draws lookers

By Kathy Kassabaum-Mitchell

Although many of us have driven by without a second glance, there is a beautiful and old oak tree ascending majestically to the heavens along far West 57th Avenue.

The stately and almost imposing bur oak grows in the front yard of Barney Golkowski of the 2600 block of West 57th Avenue.

And, judging by the experts' best guesses, the tree has been growing there, silently but steadily, for some 600 years.

"You need to walk up to the tree to really appreciate it," Golkowski told the **Merrillville Herald**.

Golkowski's mighty oak spreads widely across the western Merrillville skyline by some 100 feet. It's gnarly, inter-woven 14 or so branches allow the sun's rays to peek through just a tad, creating only dappled patches of light and dark on the grass beneath.

It's natural beauty can take your breath away.

Golkowski, 81, has shared his West 57th Avenue home with the tree since 1940. That's about the same time he and his partner, the late George Weber, started building homes and developing in the nearby Bon Aire subdivision.

"I really bought this lot on account of the tree," Golkowski recalled. "It's so beautiful, so impressive."

Currently, the tree measures about six feet thick and reaches about 70 feet high. Because it hasn't had to compete for space with neighboring trees, Golkowski's bur oak has grown up and then out, rather than being forced to shoot straight up like so many others, he said.

According to the World Book En-

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cyclopedia, the bur oak is a rugged tree that is highly prized not only for its beauty, but for its hearty constitution that tolerates dust, most diseases and insects.

Scientifically known as the quercus macrocarpa, the bur oak is also commonly referred to as the mossy-cup oak. It received this latter name because of its acorns, which are large and enclosed in a deep, fringed cup.

The bur oak trees themselves feature an irregular crown, deeply furrowed bark and shaggy, spreading branches, according to the World Book.

"It is a very healthy tree," Golkowski said. He said that acorns routinely produced, and then dropped, from the tree every other year.

Not surprisingly, Golkowski's tree has attracted a lot of attention over the years. He said it's not unusual to have strangers pull into his driveway, knock on his door, and ask to spend a few minutes admiring the tree up close.

"I'll never forget one time a couple asked me if they could take their wedding pictures under the tree," Golkowski remembers. "Weeks later, after I forgot about, here they come, all dressed up and with their photographer, using the tree as their background."

Probably the tree's most celebrated moment (in this century, at least) came in the mid-1950s. That's when Golkowski's oak came to the attention of the National Geographic Society.

"Walter Weber, the brother of my partner George, was a wildlife artist for the National Geographic magazine," Golkowski said. "He painted a picture of it that the magazine used in November 1955."

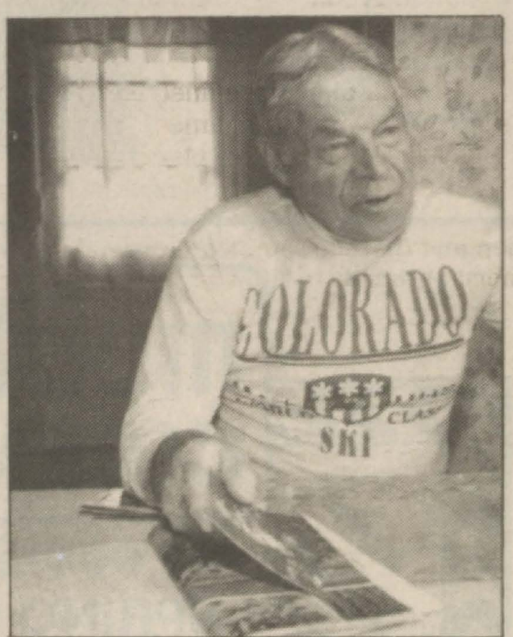

Photo by Kirk John Mitchell

Barney Golkowski, with a copy of the 1950s issue of National Geographic in which his tree appears.

The grand old tree currently shares Golkowski's two-and-a-half acres with two other bur oaks, two white oaks and two hickory trees and an assortment of other decorative shrubs and bushes.

Knowing that these trees, especially the bur oaks, will no doubt be around after we're all gone, Golkowski, as caretaker, looks after them all with great care and attention.

"There's not too many of them like this left around here," Golkowski said. "You have to take care of the ones we've got."